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ABSTRACT

This information digest emphasizes that learning-disabled students must be cautious in selecting a higher education program that matches the student's unique needs with the features of the learning disabilities program. Planning for a successful postsecondary education begins with developing an appropriate individualized educational program in high school, to ensure that students complete high school with the necessary skills, content, knowledge, and a positive self-concept. Students also need to develop skills in evaluating courses, planning long-range study time, and interacting with faculty and other students. The role of high school counselors includes providing students with detailed information about potential postsecondary institutions and analyzing students' needs in terms of the availability and quality of support services. The digest concludes with a list of questions which should be asked in making the final college selection. Four references and a list of five college guides are included. The digest was developed from a paper by S. F. Shaw et al. titled "Preparing Learning Disabled High School Students for Postsecondary Education." (JDD)

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COLLEGE PLANNING FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

High school personnel, as well as students with learning disabilities and their parents, are often frustrated in searching out a suitable postsecondary setting that will afford opportunity for success. While there are many directories of postsecondary college programs (Hartman & Krulwich, 1984), they often result in more confusion than clarity. Since there is no consistent pattern of programming for students with learning disabilities at the college level, selecting an appropriate college is often an overwhelming task.

Since there are many more colleges seeking, or at least admitting, students with learning disabilities than actually have well-developed programs, it is imperative that professionals help these students act cautiously during the selection and application process. Simply finding a "good" program or the one with the most services is not the solution. A match must be made between the unique needs of the student and the characteristics of the college and its learning disabilities program (McGuire & Shaw, 1987).

Developing an Appropriate Individualized Educational Program (IEP)

A critical element of an effective high school program is determination of which curricula and courses will be taken by students with learning disabilities. Too often, these students are counseled into a general studies curriculum that will disqualify them from admission to most 4-year colleges. In addition, many students with learning disabilities receive course waivers—often for foreign language or mathematics—which can significantly limit college options. Course waivers *may* be necessary and appropriate, but they should be provided only when based on valid diagnostic data. Furthermore, all parties should be made aware of the implications of waivers for postsecondary education.

Although the college experience is often difficult for students with learning disabilities, pacing of a course of study has proved to be an effective programming variable (Norlander, Shaw, McGuire, Bloomer, & Czajkowski, 1986). A student who might experience frustration and failure with a full college course load might be successful when taking only two or three courses. Likewise, if high school personnel, parents, and students were open to planning a 4 1/2- or 5-year program, the students would be more likely to leave high school with the skills, content, knowledge, and positive self-concept necessary for postsecondary success.

The individualized educational program or transition plan for a student with learning disabilities should provide for an early determination of postsecondary goals agreeable to all concerned and specification of the curriculum, courses, time sequence, and support program appropriate for realization of those long-term goals. The goals will require continual monitoring and adjustment throughout the high school program as the student's postsecondary and career choices become refined.

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Special Skills for College Bound-Students

The postsecondary environment is much less structured than most high school settings, requiring a great deal of responsibility on the part of students to determine what to learn as well as how and when to learn. Students with specific learning disabilities are often left confused unless they are specifically instructed in skills such as evaluating courses, planning long-range study time, and interacting with faculty. The high school setting does not typically provide the opportunity to practice such skills. Special educators, in collaboration with content teachers and counselors, must provide their students with simulated college experiences that incorporate these skills.

Potential Areas of Interpersonal Problems

Students with learning disabilities often have serious interpersonal problems in the dormitories and negative interactions with professors as they seek help or ask for accommodations. In the college setting, where students are expected to be independent and function as self-advocates, these problems soon become apparent.

Many students with learning disabilities are unable to perceive intuitively the verbal and nonverbal cues that identify appropriate behavior in various social situations. Families and teachers of these students often shelter them from potentially stressful or threatening social situations and thereby prevent them from developing the social skills they need to function successfully in the outside world. The frequent inability of these students to maintain healthy and cordial relations with their friends and with adults reflects their poor social skills development.

Characteristics of the Postsecondary Institution

High school counselors are skilled at helping typical students select colleges. However, a student with learning disabilities needs more diverse and detailed information from high school personnel than do typical students. Such a student needs to investigate admissions procedures carefully. How he or she compares to the typical entering student in terms of preparation and performance is critical in preventing a frustrating and possibly short-lived college experience.

A number of academic considerations are also critical for a student with learning disabilities. The availability of precollege courses, developmental and remedial courses, and course waiver provisions is essential information. The size of the institution itself, as well as the size of classes (particularly the number of large lecture classes) may be especially important to a student who has any of the social or interpersonal problems noted earlier.

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The Learning Disabilities Program

Once a student's personal strengths and weaknesses have been evaluated and the elements of appropriate postsecondary institutions have been considered, it is time to examine specific support services. A student with specific disabilities in mathematics might not require support services if the postsecondary institutions of choice do not require coursework in this field. On the other hand, a student who has achieved in modified high school classes without support services might require extensive assistance in a competitive academic university program. The same student might continue to manage independently in an open-enrollment, 2-year college with a vocational-technical focus. Secondary personnel must help each student analyze his or her specific needs and match them with the availability and quality of support services available.

Making the Final Selection

Once the general characteristics of appropriate settings have been determined, the list of serious choices should narrow to five or so good candidates. The schools must then be contacted, interviews arranged, and family visits planned. Campus tours and the opportunity to sit in on classes must be given particular attention, since it is extremely important for a student who has a learning disability to personally judge the level of difficulty of the instruction, observe the interaction of the students, and gain for himself or herself a sense of the relationship between the students and the faculty.

The admissions interview may not answer all the questions regarding programs for students with learning disabilities. If it does not, the student and parents must seek out and meet with a member of the learning disabilities program staff. A list of questions based on family concerns and perhaps stimulated by a review of college directories and guides or discussions with high school guidance personnel should be prepared prior to the visit. Questions might include the following:

- What type of support is available for students with learning disabilities?
- Is the program monitored by a full-time professional staff?
- Has the program been evaluated, and if so, by whom?
- Are there any concerns for the program's future?
- Who counsels students with learning disabilities during registration, orientation, and course selection?
- How does the school propose to help with the specific disability?
- Which courses provide tutoring?
- What kind of tutoring is available, and who does it—peers or staff?
- Is tutoring automatic, or must the student request assistance?
- How well do faculty members accept students with learning disabilities?
- May students with learning disabilities take a lighter load?
- Are courses in study skills or writing skills offered?
- Have counselors who work with students with learning disabilities received special training?
- How do students on campus spend their free time?
- May students with learning disabilities take more time to graduate?
- Whom can parents contact if they have concerns during the academic year? (Berger, 1989)

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